

Testimony Presented to  
Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
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Greeley, Colorado

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee on Agriculture for allowing me this opportunity to present testimony. I am Tom Compton. My wife and I own and operate a commercial cow/calf business in Southwest Colorado. Although I am past president of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association, the views I express today are personal and only represent the thoughts my wife and I have on agricultural public policy. However, I believe you will find our views to be relatively consistent with the those of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

I believe the 2002 Farm Bill, which continued the "freedom to farm" emphasis, was a step in the right direction by allowing ranchers and farmers more leeway in the choice of management objectives which best suit their individual operations as opposed to directing what they could or should not grow in order to qualify for a government program. I would like to see even more emphasis on programs that assist the producer through educational efforts directed toward best management practices then providing incentives for the adoption of those practices. The EQIP program, administered through the Natural Resource Conservation Service, is an excellent example. The NRCS assists the producer in the development of a long range conservation plan then offers incentives through a cost share for the landowner to incorporate best management practices to accomplish the objectives of the plan. One small problem which you might address is to direct USDA to grant more flexibility to NRCS to adjust cost share requirements because sometimes portions of these conservation plans may have significant benefits for wildlife species but contribute little to the economic viability of the ranching operation so it is difficult for the landowner to justify the expense.

I believe the 2002 Farm Bill with amendments made an effort to address disaster assistance for ranchers and farmers. Natural disasters such as drought and wildfire create significant problems for us and it appears that this year will be a repeat of 2002 for those of us in southern Colorado. In order to sustain a ranching operation in the arid Southwest a rancher must learn to anticipate drought and develop strategies to manage accordingly. I do not expect or want the government to bail me out when I make poor decisions but when disasters occur there are other ways to assist. One of the most helpful things Congress did for me was to extend the period of time from two years to four years for me to reinvest the money I received from the forced sale of livestock due to drought. I'm sure many of you supported that legislation and my wife and I thank you. We must find creative ways to assist ranchers and farmers in rebuilding their operations following disaster without greatly increasing the cost of government.

It is also important to take care that we do not create programs that assist some while placing others at a disadvantage. The emergency haying and grazing of CRP lands is an important tool for disaster assistance but you must monitor this activity to prevent abuse and put an unwanted burden on hay markets thus harming a hay producer's business. We need disaster assistance policies that help the family ranch stay in business but do not interfere with the free market or infringe upon the private property rights of the families. You will notice I have made reference to disaster assistance, not disaster relief. We do not need programs that become an opportunity to create inequities between neighbors and they should not become opportunities for producers to have income over and above what is possible in a normal year. According to an editorial in the Washington Post on April 29, the Senate has proposed an additional \$1.56 billion for "disaster relief" payments to farmers who already receive subsidies for growing certain crops.

I realize that many, if not most, Americans desire cheap energy and cheap food and I further realize that this committee has a very difficult job in analyzing the situation from a "big picture" perspective, BUT JUST GIVING AWAY LARGE SUMS OF MONEY MAY NOT BE THE BEST LONG-TERM SOLUTION.

In Colorado, nearly one half of the land mass, 33 million acres, is owned and managed by agricultural interests. These working landscapes are truly the front lines of conservation. These farms and ranches are providing vast acreages of wildlife habitat, open space and viewsheds. For example, I have been keeping track of the birds I see on our ranch in western Colorado. There are approximately 60 species of birds that spend at least some of their life on the habitat we provide. While my wife and I receive no direct economic benefit from their presence we are please to be able to contribute to their wellbeing. While we should always be looking for new conservation efforts, I believe we should consider doing everything we can to bolster the ongoing activities of ranching and farming families. By keeping these operations economically viable, society gets the added benefit of their conservation efforts. Conservation groups are sometimes a little like local economic development groups who measure their success by the number of new businesses they bring to the community when they might get a greater return on their investment by assisting businesses already in the community. By keeping lands in agricultural production we not only meet conservation goals, but we also support rural economies and the local tax base without additional cost of government.

The Colorado Cattlemen's Association, the nation's oldest state cattlemen's association, was one of the first agricultural producer groups in the nation to form a Conservation Land Trust.

As the initial chairman of the board I can tell you that we did this because of increasing development pressures being exerted on our ag lands and conservation easements seemed to be one tool we could use to address the problem. Since ranchers seem to have an inherent distrust of government sponsored land trusts and other non-agriculturally oriented land trusts, the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust was created. CCALT recently accepted its 100 th easement and have assisted families on about 188,000 acres. There is a waiting list of ranchers who wish to establish easements but the lack of funding for setting up the agreements prevents many from proceeding. These voluntary agreements, negotiated between the landowner and the land trust, not only help the family ranch remain economically viable but also keep many ecosystems intact. It is my understanding the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spent \$60 million on habitat acquisition in 2004. It seems to me society would get a greater return on its investment if you directed the Department of Interior to work with the Department of Agriculture to leverage these funds by using them to assist private land trusts and private landowners in establishing voluntary conservation easement agreements. The result would be ranchers doing the conservation work and the land trust monitoring the ranchers to the general benefit of society, all at no additional cost to the taxpayer. I know this benefit is possible because, on my federal grazing allotment you get me to pay for the privilege of building and maintaining improvements such as trails and water developments as well as assisting in the suppression of wildfire fuels. The recreating public uses the trails, the wildlife uses the water and my cattle get a bite to eat. It seems to be a win-win deal all around. I do support tax deductions for those ranchers who choose to protect their property using conservation easements and tax incentives for voluntary stewardship efforts. Isn't it a good idea to conserve privately-owned working landscapes and facilitate voluntary conservation efforts?

I want you to know that cowboys understand that farm public policy is not just about cows. We realize there is a bigger picture for this committee to paint. For example, as a member of a Rural Electric Cooperative, I am supportive of efforts to use agriculture in the production of renewable energy. Programs such as those using farm products to produce ethanol and biodiesel are quite probably good ideas. It is a good thing especially when you assist local communities in their efforts to form cooperatives to raise crops, produce biofuels and distribute them to the public. It is an added benefit when the members of the co-op can obtain fuels at a reduced cost to use in their operations. I did have some concern when I recently read that most of the 50 cent per gallon ethanol subsidy goes to the oil refinery doing the blending rather than the producer growing the crop. I am not a big fan of subsidies and I am even less of a fan when the aid is not going to the farmer.

I want you to know that I am supportive of the ethanol program even though I realize that it will likely raise the market price of corn, a major feed resource for cattle feeding, but I am trying to see the big picture.

For the past several years I have regularly entered the lion's den, or perhaps I should say the wolf's den, by serving on a wolf reintroduction team, not because I am really excited to see wolves reintroduced, but because society seems to think it is a great idea and I want livestock interest to be considered in the process. It's a "big picture" thing for me. You see, I sort of understand your predicament in writing a "big picture" farm bill.

I understand that the World Trade Commission is currently reviewing many of our commodity programs. It would be most helpful if a farm bill would enhanced our market access and our ability to compete internationally by not creating more programs that must be reviewed for compliance problems by the WTC.

I wish I could be more helpful in suggesting what should be included in the 2007 Farm Bill. I can tell you with certainty what should not be included and that is language that tells producers how to treat animals. It is my understanding that various animal rights groups, many of which wish to eliminate animal agriculture, are pressuring Congress to constrain well established animal husbandry practices. I make money by selling pounds of beef. I make pounds of beef by creating and maintaining healthy pastures and rangelands to provide forage for my cattle. Increased weight gains come from healthy and contented cattle. It would not make much sense for me to do things that negatively impact my healthy rangelands or cause my cattle discontent. To do so would decrease the number of pounds I have available to market. If you wish to fund research at land grant universities that will demonstrate ways to make my rangelands healthier or my cattle happier, I am most willing to be educated and better informed. Perhaps that is the sort of thing to consider in a farm bill.

Let me summarize with some thoughts for your consideration.

- Keep extraneous issues out of the Farm Bill and focus on improving the existing titles of the current bill. Focus the 2007 Farm Bill toward agriculture, not on trifling with animal rights issues.
- Increase the efficiency and funding of the conservation programs that keep working landscapes in working hands.
- Promote private-public initiatives as opposed to government mandates and increased subsidies.
- Preserve the right of individual choice in the management of land, water, and other natural resources.
- Work to enhance our market access internationally.

